

THE GIRL from PROSPERITY

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

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When James E. Carroll, his attire fully kempt up to his pink tie, swaggered into the Hotel Belvedere barber shop, the boss barber loafing over at the table of Bessie Williams grinned in spite of his present ill humor.

"Pipe the village cut-up," he observed.

The Manicure Girl surveyed the newcomer with a keen eye.

"No, Billy," she replied, "it's the village sport."

"Whatever he is," insisted Billy, "he's a Hick and looking for a ten-cent shave."

Again the girl surveyed the newcomer critically.

"No," she once more dissented, "I'll bet you the size of the tip that he tips you."

"The same which would be a fine and wise bet for me to make, I think not," observed Billy, and added a forcible word or so under his breath as he started forward, for Mr. James E. Carroll, having looked down the line of Greeks and Italians who stood invitingly at their empty chairs, gave a glance at the only American barber in the place, and climbed into the only chair which had no attendant.

"I'll take a round trip," he affably observed as Billy slipped the sleeves of the shaving apron over his arms.

"Shave, sir?" coldly inquired Billy, who, nevertheless, had understood perfectly what his customer meant.

"The whole howling hippodrome," said young Mr. Carroll, unabashed. "Do everything you know how."

"Just watch me make this fresh wop's pocket change shrink down to the edge of his return ticket," growled Billy to the Manicure Girl as he made a pretext to go past her table for fresh towels.

"I wouldn't have your ingrowing grouch for money," laughed the girl.

"You would if you ached to furnish a flat and got turned down every time you mentioned it," he complained.

"I told you that was barred," she informed him. "I think I see myself in an East Harlem flat, with cheese-cloth curtains on the front windows and a garbage can on the fire escape, counting how many wienerswurats we get for a dime."

It was in consequent awareness that Billy began upon the task of giving his country customer "a round trip." He cut that hearty young gentleman's hair, and singed and shampooed and dandruffed it, he shaved him and massaged his head and his face, he put upon him drenches of every bottled thing in his possession, then he grinned, yanked up the chair, jerked off the towels and handed over his largest check. But Mr. Carroll was scarcely interested.

"Is that all you can do?" he asked.

"We have a chopologist, but he's not on duty just now," smiled Billy; "while you're waiting, though, you can get manicured."

"Me for the manicure. I've heard about 'em," said Mr. Carroll; "and just as a sporting proposition I'm going to sample a sample of everything there is in New York."

"Just go right ahead and see if New York cares," Billy advised him.

"I don't care whether New York cares," returned Mr. Carroll, largely, "and that's where I've got the best of New York."

As a matter of living up to that largeness he presented Billy with half a dollar, then he swaggered across the shop to the cashier's desk, flaunting a twenty-dollar bill in his hand and glancing with speculative assurance at the row of manicure girls. Tessa, who was quite universal in her tastes, used her large eyes freely, but with the usual negative effect. Nobody could be persuaded to believe them. Instead of succumbing to the girl who owned them, Mr. Carroll's gaze roved right on over her head to the deceptively demure Miss Williams.

"Mr. Smarty from Smartville," commented Tessa with a toss of her head.

"I don't want him," retorted Miss Williams. "If I draw Johnny Fresh I'll give him the salted down of his life. It'll be a real quiet convention we'll hold, with me in the steam roller part."

As a preliminary to this process, when Mr. Carroll sat down at the table she spread out both hands before her and surveyed them critically; then she smiled with an apparent attempt to conceal it; then she looked demurely up. Mr. Carroll was red. Some uncomfortable thought held him silent throughout the entire operation, checking any desire for conversation and killing any inclination whatsoever toward flippancy. When he got up to go he looked at the change dubiously, then at the girl, then back at the change and again grew red. His dilemma was obvious. He did not know whether or not it was the proper thing to tip a lady. Sometimes Miss Williams took tips and sometimes she refused them. This time she accepted before one was really offered.

"Thank you," said she very sweetly.

He pushed a quarter toward her tentatively and she swept it nonchalantly into the little drawer of her table.

"Thank you," she said again, still very sweetly.

Those were the only four words that had been spoken during the entire event.

"How did you tame him, Bess?" asked the other girl.

"Made him see the size of his hands," explained Miss Williams with a shrug. "You can do that with any of them that have big ones, and after that they'll lay down and roll over and jump through hoops at the mere glance of command."

The next day he came again, but with not nearly so much assurance. Again he took Billy's chair, but there was very little aggressiveness about him.

"What will you have a sample of today?" asked Billy.

"Shave," said Mr. Carroll, wearily, as he lay back in the chair.

When Billy turned him loose he went over to Miss Williams and pressed out his hands upon her table, dropping opposite to her with a dead-tired air.

"You don't want me to treat your nails again?" she objected.

"Sure," he said. "I came in on purpose."

"This is one of the good things you can overdo," she told him. "If I'd give those nails the full course so soon you'd have to get a new set." He was quite dismal about it.

"Can't you just fuss around with them a little bit, then?" he inquired.

"I'm so lonesome I could go to jail for company."

"Maybe I could finish yesterday's job a little," she returned. "It would be cheating, but I don't mind," and she studied them carefully.

The fact of the matter was that Mr. James E. Carroll was quite palpably unhappy, and the Manicure Girl, who always wore her claws unsheathed for "fresh" people, could not withhold comfort from unhappy ones.

"What's the matter? Hasn't New York been clubby with you?" she asked, as she went gingerly to work.

"No," he complained, "the town's too slow. There's more fun out in Prosperity, Indiana, where I came from."

"That isn't what ails you. There's a girl back in Prosperity."

"There's half a dozen of them," he grinned.

"Yes?" she inquired, and looked him over carefully. "There's only one. I'll put a little bet down on it: a bag of peanuts against a package of chewing gum."

He looked a long time at the Manicure Girl's imported pompadour, then he called a boy and handed him a quarter.

"Bring a package of chewing gum," he ordered.

That's when Miss Williams began not to dislike him so much.

"Yes," he went on by and by. "There is just one girl back in Prosperity, that is, one worth mentioning, and I'd give a hundred dollars if she was here."

"So much as a hundred left," she asked, in apparent surprise; "and you here two days?"

"It does melt pretty fast," he confessed, smiling. "But I'm good for a few days longer. I brought between three and four hundred dollars with me."

"Gee!" exclaimed Miss Williams. "What will they do for a circulating medium out there?"

"Oh, there's some left, I guess," he told her, "but not among the gang. You see, I won this in a poker game, the biggest one we ever had in town."

"My, what a wicked little sport!" she gasped. "I guess you're the horrible example in Prosperity. I guess they won't let you come to the church socials, nor the husking beak, nor anything. What does the girl think of it?"

"She doesn't know anything about it," he returned rather soberly. "If she found it out, I don't think she'd like it very much."

Miss Williams liked him even better for the seriousness with which he considered this phase of the matter.

"Of course, she's pretty," she suggested by and by.

It was good to see his face light up.

"I call her Reddy, but her hair isn't really red," he explained. "It's a dark brown, that seems to flare up copper colored sometimes when the sun shines through it; and she has the brownest of brown eyes, and the reddest of red lips, and the whitest of white teeth, and the pinkiest cheeks; and—"

"Sure," she interrupted; "I know the kind. You can find her on the front page of any of the twenty-six best sellers, and on the covers of all the magazines when they haven't anything special to feature; and I suppose after this lonesome little Seeing-New-York trip all by yourself, you'll go back home and marry the girl in the last chapter."

"You bet I will," he returned, decidedly, and when he got up to go he was feeling a lot more cheerful.

The boss barber was not, however. "Some chummy with Mr. Yap from Yaptown," he sneered to the Manicure Girl.

"He's a real nice little Hick, Billy," she insisted, "but he was as solemn as classic music; and you know me. Any time I see anybody look moody I've got to be busy Bessie, the Cheerful-Chirker-up."

"So I notice," said Billy, "but you usually manage to spring that gag on the strangers."

"You needn't worry, Billy," she retorted. "Not that you've got any mortgage on the premises, but that I hate to see you taking all that spite out on the poor Dagos. Considering the couple of hundred dollars my pet Hick has left, he's not likely to be in any more."

She was mistaken. In a week he was in again, more aggressive even than he had been the first time. Some way there was a change in him. The noisy tie was gone, he had a new hat, and he carried himself a shade "scrappy," as she expressed it.

"Hello!" she hailed him. "I thought you'd gone back to the girl in Prosperity."

"Not yet," he said. "I don't think I'm going back except when I go after the girl."

"No?" she asked. "What's holding you?"

"Money," he replied gleefully, and displayed a huge roll of bills.

"Who died in your family?" she asked.

"It isn't that," he laughed. "But New York has too much loose coin for a man to leave. I've found out how to take his wealth away from it."

"Good!" she exclaimed. "Little old New York needs a trimming. Go after it and get it good. But how are you doing it? I'm greedy to know."

"Oh, just speculating a little in stock and grain," he replied.

"Reuben, Reuben!" she gasped. "You'll be the death of me yet."

"You're mistaken in the name," he retorted. "It's Hiram H. Hanks of Hawkinsville, or possibly Josh Dill of Picklesburg."

She surveyed him with some disfavor. "My, but I bet they miss you in Prosperity. What a merry way you must be when you're going good."

"Regular clown," he grinned. "Just for that I'll make you listen to my real name."

From his pocket he drew a stamped and addressed letter and pointed to the "James E. Carroll" written in the corner under the Belvedere card.

"And here's the girl," he said, pointing to the address with a strange combination of diffidence and assertiveness. "Elizabeth Ruth Emery."

"That isn't what ails you. There's a girl back in Prosperity."

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"Hick, isn't he, Billy? Yap, I guess! Also a pin-head and a few other things; but just the same, he came here to spend three hundred dollars, and he's been here over a week, and he's got about six hundred of it left. I call that real Marathon blood myself. If you'd go out and turn a few tricks like that you could come down to your daily toll in a buzz-wagon."

"He'll be down on the Bowery handling before he gets through," growled Billy.

It did not seem to happen right at once, however. Every time James E. Carroll came in he looked more prosperous, and he told the Manicure Girl each time of how much money he was making as a "grain and stock operator." Every time it was more and more. He didn't exactly boast about it; he was only gleeful in a large, childish way, and it is doubtful if he gloated to any one else as he did to Miss Williams. He had constituted her his confidante from the beginning, and seemed to feel it a solemn duty, as well as a joy, to come in and let her know his progress. It was strange, too, to see his transition from a country boy to an all-arounder. His clothing now was up to the minute, his talk up to the second, and everything about him was right on the dot; but in place of the rugged pink and brown of his cheeks he now had a massaged complexion, and there were pouches under his eyes.

The Manicure Girl came in one day laughing and still half vexed.

"Guess where I saw James E. Carroll," she said to Tessa; "in a big red racer with three stunning chorus girls. I was with Frank—you know him; head rusher at Churley's."

"It's Plunger Jimmy Carroll," Frank told me.

"Gee! I said. 'Has he got so far along that Broadway knows him?'"

"Sure," said Frank. "He's the hottest member on the main stem. He's just Jimmy, along the line. All the late places know him and all the folies and flumes know him. How's that for a pace?"

"He got the quickest education of anybody ever I saw," commented Tessa. "If he was mine I'd have a sparkling rock as big as the head of a hat pin out of him."

"You've had plenty of chances," retorted Miss Williams, "but I don't notice that Tiffany effect on you."

Mr. Carroll came in the next day, beaming.

"You ought to see my new car," he told the Manicure Girl as he sat down at her table.

"I saw it yesterday," she snapped. "You were peddling a fine load of shrimps."

"Weren't they the class of the car?" he jumped up and unwound his dog chain; and his face had turned suddenly pale. "My ideas have changed somewhat about things back in Prosperity, but I can't stand for having that girl roared, even in a joke."

It was over a month before he came in again, and the Manicure Girl had missed him. Now she saw at once that something was wrong. He was nervous and abstracted, though he tried to be his old flippancy self. With the shrewd eyes of Miss Williams upon him he kept thinking of one thing while he talked of another, asked questions without listening to the answers, then asked the same questions again.

"How much did you lose?" she finally asked him.

He stared at her in wonder.

"How did you know? Where did you hear?" he slowly questioned.

"You've been telling me ever since you came in," she said.

"I expect I have," he admitted. "Well, they got to me in lumps and gobs. For the past month I think I was about the only bull in a bear market. I went down the greased incline so fast it smoked from the friction. The first of this week I had to sell both automobiles."

"I can see the headline and the glimmer of the watch going next," she commented, with a shake of her head. "I suppose they've about got all that automobile money by now."

"Suppose again," he retorted. "They did get nearly all of it at first, but the market changed at last, and I've made a little money since. If I'd close out now I'd have at least three thousand."

"Tell me where it is and I'll go get it for you," offered the Manicure Girl, hastily. "You take that money and go right back to Prosperity; buy the village dry goods emporium; marry that girl; settle down and get fat. Then this experience will have done you good."

He shook his head.

"I can never go back there," he said; "never! That's not my world. I tell you. I'll make back the money I lost. I've learned a few tricks in the last couple of weeks."

"Oh, New York will educate you," she sneered; "but you know, college graduates don't amount to much."

"Never mind," he insisted. "I've played this game to win before, and I can do it again. Watch me."

"You'd better send at least one thousand dollars of that money to the girl back home to plant under the cellar stairs," she suggested.

She watched him narrowly, and then she smiled to herself. The mention of the girl in Prosperity did not seem to annoy him this time.

"That much money wouldn't scare her, at any rate," he said, smiling. "She's rather well-to-do for a country girl. She's an orphan and lives with her married sister. But don't you worry about that thousand. I can use that to elegant advantage myself."

The next time she saw him was on the street. He tried to pass on by with a nod, but she called to him and he came back reluctantly.

"What's it good for besides killing?" she asked, eyeing the creature with supreme disfavor.

"It's to make an already peerless beauty look still more like a queen," he told her, complacently. "I examined something like two tons of dogs to find this specimen. I bought it to take my place in the honk wagon alongside of Beauty Phillips, when I'm busy throwing a harpoon into the wheat pit."

"Did you write that letter yet?" she demanded.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"It's about time to write another one, isn't it?"

"No," he replied, defiantly. "I'm not going to write any more."

She looked at him and shook her head, but she said nothing, and her very silence angered him.

"What's the use?" he hotly went on, and she divine that, after all, his anger was more at himself than at her. "Why should I hide the facts from myself any longer. I've grown away from Prosperity."

"I should say you had," she agreed. "If Prosperity could know how you've changed for the worse, it wouldn't recognize you on the street."

"It's not my world any more," he continued, paying no attention to her interruption, "and the people are not of my world."

"So you hinted before," she reminded him; "but that doesn't keep you from writing to the girl."

He hesitated a moment.

"But her letters do," he finally said. "I got one from her yesterday. It was about nothing but the new coat of paint on the Baptist church, and about there being an epidemic of measles in the town, and about—"

"That's about far enough," she told him, furiously angry. "Awful drivels, isn't it? I can see the little fool out there sitting down to write about such trifling things in her ignorance. Red hair I think you said she had, and red cheeks, and you called her Reddy. Coarse, ignorant, country person, no doubt. Well, I don't believe you for shaking her, now that you have got up among the real people, real ladies like Beauty Phillips and her crowd, and real gentlemen of the sort that loaf around the hotel bars on Broadway. You're right to cut her dead right now. Why, she might sometimes come to New York, and if she should happen to meet you on Broadway when you were with some of your swell friends, and should nod to you, you'd be disgraced for life. I'll bet she'd be a scream on Broadway, with her funny clothes and her funny little hat and her red complexion."

"That'll be about all," he said, as he jumped up and unwound his dog chain; and his face had turned suddenly pale. "My ideas have changed somewhat about things back in Prosperity, but I can't stand for having that girl roared, even in a joke."

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